

Risk Communication

Dr. Robin Koons

Communicating Risk in Critical Situations

Robin K. Koons, Ph.D.,
Occupational/Environmental Epidemiologist
Independent Consultant; Denver, Colorado
(303/632-4912) rkoons5528@aol.com

Communicating risk can be both challenging and stressful. It is an art and a science that requires skill and intuition for success. Too often agencies focus on the science and ad-lib the most critical components of risk communication -- the actual message being conveyed. To avoid a disastrous experience, it is essential to have a communication plan in place before you find yourself in a critical situation. As with any strategic planning process, there are basic rules and guidelines you should follow. These rules are general and can be adapted to virtually any situation. The outcome will vary based on the audience receiving the information, the circumstances surrounding the situation (how quickly the communication begins), and the individuals delivering the message.

In developing a framework for successful risk communication, focus on three key areas: (1) your primary goal, (2) internal communication, and (3) external communication:

Establishing Your Goal

The ultimate goal of risk communication is typically stating the health affects to those humans exposed to the agent. The scientific part of the process must come first. Do your homework before conveying your message. A good epidemiologic risk assessment process should take place; the hazard needs to be identified. That is, what is the problem? Is it a chemical or biological agent? How much is present? How widespread is the contaminant? Who/what is the host? What are the environmental conditions that allow for transmission? It is unwise to make assumptions in this critical step. Your sampling techniques need to be well thought out, recorded, and interpreted consistently.

A critical step to the risk assessment process is characterizing the risk. You need to establish the dose-response relationship between the agent and audience perceived at risk. The impact on human health is often based on age, gender, and other important characteristics your epidemiologic assessment has identified (such as vulnerable populations with specific underlying medical conditions, occupations, ethnic background, etc.). Remember, even with all of these factors present, the risk only occurs if the exposure takes place! Make sure this is stated in your message.

Once the scientific data is known, managing the situation follows. Presenting risk assessment data without stating what your agency is doing to manage the situation sets you up for a difficult interaction with the public. This is how hysteria develops, loss of credibility for those agencies in charge, and lack of trust. If your management plan is incomplete -- present what you have. It's okay to let your audience know your agency is working on it and you don't have all the answers yet! Saying something is better than saying nothing at all and being timely is far better than waiting until you have all the answers.

Internal Communication

Risk communication begins in your own office! That first person who answers a question from the public can set the tone for what happens next. Make sure you have a framework in place to communicate internally. Have a template of the memo format for the message you would like your staff to convey -- your goal. Provide your front line people (those taking the incoming calls) with an outline of what should be stated to any caller asking for information related to the situation. Send this statement to agencies and private companies you are working with so

consistency exists for all involved. The goal here is to have everyone conveying the same message. Treat every caller as you would a reporter and train all of your staff on telephone risk communication guidelines.

Interact with outside agencies before you are in a critical situation so you know your contacts and have a procedure in place for the teamwork that must occur when communicating risk. Identify your staff who will be designated to work with the other agencies or private companies involved as part of your contingency plan development.

Use your staff to test your message before communicating to the public. If these professionals and paraprofessionals have concerns or questions after hearing the message, modify the message and test it again. These individuals are not as close to the situation as those conducting the actual investigation and making the management decisions. Thus, they may key in on an important oversight. Risk communication is always a two-way process. Interpret your data but know the limitations of it and be prepared to verbalize those limitations. Expect to make modifications in your message and accept your staff and other agencies/companies as partners in the communication process.

External Communication

Involving the public early has been proven time after time to be critical to the success of communicating risk. Identify groups that represent the community (parent-teacher associations, church leaders, retail associations, etc.) and discuss with them the concerns they are hearing from the community -- don't assume your perception of the fears are the public's actual concerns. People want and expect to be a part of the assessment process and the decision-making when it involves their lives. They are likely to become a more volatile audience if they feel they have no control over the decisions on their lives or dealing with the risks (voluntary versus involuntary decisions, such as helmet laws for motorcycles).

Don't wait until you have all the answers before you communicate anything. Present your message in a timely manner and update them frequently. If you are presenting in a community meeting format and questions are asked that you don't know the answer to ---- say you don't know. It takes a long time to establish credibility and seconds to destroy it! Admitting limitations in your knowledge or the data available is far less damaging than making an erroneous statement. The Internet gives the public a great opportunity to obtain their own answers; don't underestimate the intellect of your audience.

For formal presentations, provide your audience with a written summary. More people are visual learners than auditory and you will have greater success if you allow your audience the opportunity to see your message so they can digest it more quickly and accurately. This will reduce your questions and assist in keeping your presentation on focus. Avoid using technical words and jargon on both the handouts and your screen presentation. For slides, avoid placing words in red. If there are important words or phrases you want your audience to remember, use yellow. The brain retains words highlighted in yellow longer than other colors. Try to hold questions until the end of your presentation -- BUT ---- if the audience is restless and not attentive, stop. You may have missed the boat on the real issues they want answers to so discontinue with your agenda and listen to them. If you have missed what their concerns are, don't even try to finish. Begin writing down what they saying and let your audience know you'll get that information to them. If you have completed your presentation and giving time for questions, tell your audience in advance the time limit they have. This is important to the final success of communicating your message. It also will help control unruly members in the audience and negative behavior that can dilute your message.

Then there is the media. Many dread working with the media for a variety of reasons. But the media can be your greatest mechanism for relaying information to a large audience. As with other agencies you work closely with, establish a rapport with your local paper as part of your

contingency plan. Know where to send a press release and identify your contacts. Give reporters positive feedback on good stories and share with them concerns you had on other articles on an ongoing basis to educate them. If you don't have this opportunity and you get that surprise call, take charge! Too many people behave as a child sitting in the principal's office. They see this authority figure that is intimidating and they feel obliged to answer the questions being asked or respond to attacks. You are not that child and they are not the authority figure! You are not obligated to answer every question or respond to every statement they make. Don't talk fast and don't use technical jargon to just get them off the phone. This is guaranteed to result in a bad story. Speak slowly, concisely, and factually. Follow it up with a written statement to help the reporter succeed in relaying your message. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them you'll check on it and get back to them. Then, Get Back To Them! They have a deadline and a boss. Respect their deadlines or accept partial responsibility for the product because they will go somewhere else to get their answers.

If you have a camera interview, ask the interviewer what questions they will be asking before going on camera. I never met a reporter who wouldn't share this. But don't ever believe what you say off-camera means it's off the record! Act professional at all times and stay focused on your message. Working with the media is an almost certain entity in situations of risk communication. It is an important part of your contingency plan that is often forgotten. Don't be caught off guard. Keep your internal communication network updated and provide the other agencies and companies involved in the situation with your statement to ensure success.

The final part of the contingency plan for risk communication is the closure. If it is a long and involved situation, this may occur several times as key phases come to an end. Closure requires a debriefing to occur -- with your staff, other agencies or companies involved, and the public. Did you meet your goal? What could have gone more smoothly? What needs to be incorporated into, or removed from, your contingency plan to improve success? Test your options and then implement what works into your revised communication plan. Let the public know there is closure so they aren't left hanging or waiting for more to be done. Don't forget to thank your colleagues, the community representatives, and your counterparts in other agencies. You never know when you'll need them again!

We communicate risk on a daily basis without giving it a second thought. But when the magnitude of the risk or the population at risk increases, our confidence weakens. Risk communication becomes less intimidating and increases in success when you have a plan and you know it works. Improve your agency's response time and communication success by performing tabletop drills. Take articles from newspapers or develop scenarios and talk through what you would do if those situations occurred in your community. Role play by having staff portray those inquisitive or hostile community members that could complicate your plan. The key to risk communication success is being honest, timely, and confident. It is a science that has basic rules to follow to create the desired outcome and it is an art where the variables of the audience and the situation will require some intuition to modify the approach at the right times to insure success. Plan for it and practice it!